

Formative Influences on Lillian Hellman

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Abstract – Lillian Hellman was impressed and influenced by writings of Ibsen, Brecht, Strindberg and Chekhov, and she also shows considerable influence of native writers too, like Eugene O'Neill and Dashiell Hammett. Eugene O'Neill was a senior contemporary playwright of Lillian Hellman, and much before her appearance on the American stage, O'Neill had already carved a niche for himself as a formidable playwright. He introduced psychological realism in his plays, so do we notice this element in Hellman's plays as well. Freudian overtones gave American plays a new vitality and originality. In fact, the psychoanalytical theories of Freud had moved and influenced almost all the writers of the 1930s, and even the subsequent ones. Their plays are full of aberrant and inverted relationships - incestuously lustful fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, adulterous men and women, homosexual love relationships and repressed sexual instincts, to name just a few psychological issues. Both O'Neill and Hellman sought to portray how the hidden psychological processes affect the outward actions of their characters. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), O'Neill uses a Greek legend as his model, and Hellman's Hubbard plays also exhibit considerable resemblance to Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Oresteia*. However, Hellman's strong protest against the passive indifference of the bystanders in the face of social and moral evils takes her plays beyond the realm of pure tragedy, unlike O'Neill's, who adheres to the Greek pattern to a sizeable degree. Like O'Neill, Hellman's good characters too wrestle with societal constrictions, and usually give in to forces they are powerless to control. O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1935) which is an autobiographical play showed agonized relationships between members of a family (father, mother and two sons), and Hellman's no play is free from such painful relationships.

Key Words – Influence, Psychological Realism, Plays, Aberrant Relationships, Melodramatic Techniques, Symbolism, Cognitivism, Non-Conformist etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Lillian Hellman is chiefly known as the author of the Broadway plays, especially, *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes* and *Watch on the Rhine*. She emerged into a largely male-dominated field in 1934 with *The Children's Hour*, a play that rocked the literary establishment with its bold treatment of theme (lesbianism) while calling attention to her literary talents. With her very first play, Hellman became the youngest successful lady playwright (while she was merely 29) in the United States and probably in the world as well. Written between 1934 and 1963, Hellman's dramatic canon includes eight original plays and four adaptations. She has also written quite a few film-scripts for the Hollywood film industry, including several screenplays from her dramas. In addition to her plays, she has authored a few non-dramatic works as well. For instance, she has to her credit three well-acclaimed memoirs, a novella, some shorter prose pieces, and articles for national magazines and newspapers. Besides, she has edited Chekhov's letters and Dashiell Hammett's mysteries. Thus, she has been a prolific writer, however, it is through her plays that she won a safe and secure place for herself

amongst the playwrights of the Twentieth Century American Stage.

Hellman's earlier plays, especially, *The Children's Hour* and the Hubbard plays are modelled upon the plays of Ibsen. Like Ibsen, Hellman's major concern in her plays has been the duty of the individual towards himself, and not to the obsolete and unhealthy conventions of the bourgeois society. Very much like him, she too did not follow the romantic style of her contemporary women playwrights, whereas, she dealt with problems and ideas of the day onto the stage of her times. She also believed that drama can be a strong medium to voice her protest against the social and moral evils of the times. Hellman shares her technical mastery of well-made and tightly knit plots, trenchant characterization, symbolism, psychological insight, and such melodramatic techniques as blackmailing, destructive truth-telling, turning of tables just before the fall of curtain etc. with Ibsen. Besides, she also shares with him, her acute sense of social and moral concern, realistic mode, penetrating dialogues and rigorous thought and action. As Ibsen's, Hellman's plots are also deliberate acts of cognitivism, in which characters are stripped of their accumulated

disguises and forced to acknowledge their trueselves, for better or worse. Thus, they both made their audiences re-examine with painful earnestness the moral foundation of their being. As in Ibsen's play, *Ghosts*, the sins of the father are passed on to the son, so does Hellman depict in *Another Part of the Forest*, how Marcus' little foxes have completely taken after their depraved father.

Brecht was a contemporary playwright of Hellman, in a sense that he was merely seven-year older to her, however, she admired him as the master dramatist of the century. Hellman's 'War-plays' and the 'Hubbard plays' show Brecht's considerable influence on her. In Brecht's plays also, one notices the utter rottenness of bourgeois, capitalist society. He strongly believed in the Marxist society and condemned the capitalist society. He was of the view that only Marxist society could deliver justice and could solve the social problems of unrest, especially labour-unrest, poverty and economic depression. As Hellman's war-plays are anti-fascist plays, so does Brecht voice his protest against the National Socialist and fascist-movements in *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, etc. They both wanted their audience to adopt a critical perspective to acknowledge social injustice and corruption and leave the theatre aroused and determined to bring about a change in the world outside.

Strindberg too seems to have exerted a major influence on Hellman. His use of realism, naturalism and expressionism had a notable effect on the writings of Hellman and her other contemporary American playwrights. He was a Swedish dramatist and novelist, and his works often displayed the belief that life and the existing system was profoundly unjust and oppressive to the common folk. Strindberg did not protest against any specific social or moral evil; he expressed his disgust against the total social and political set up. He satirized the social evils prevalent in Swedish society, in particular, the upper classes, the cultural and political establishment. Although, Hellman's area of protest was not so wide yet she also did not conform to the prevailing social and political system. Like Strindberg, Hellman too could be highly confrontational with her many personal and professional foes.

Strindberg's first mature play, *Master Olaf* (1873) exhibited the impact of Ibsen and Shakespeare, it represented the personality of the author in three characters. In the late 1880s, he brought out the great dramas: *The Father* (1887), *Miss Julie* (1888), and *Creditors* (1888), all written in a subjective and emotional tone. These plays of Strindberg show the influence of Zola and Nietzsche. *The Father* expresses Strindberg's view of the battle between the sexes, and the assertion of will, and ultimately victimization of man by a woman. His male and female characters are inevitably bound together in a perverse and dependent relationship. The play also depicts a strong nymphomaniacal desire for physical possession. *Miss*

Julie is a psychological study of the seduction of an upper-class woman by an insensitive chauffeur. One comes across a more or less similar situation in Hellman's play, *Toys in the Attic*, however, in a slightly different context. If Lily-Julian relationship is reflected in *The Father*, then Mrs Prine-Henry love affair reminds of *Miss Julie*. The difference is just that in *Toys in Attic* the relationship between the upper-class Mrs Prine and her mulatto chauffeur is voluntary, nevertheless, against the existing social norms. In *Creditors* too Strindberg presents women in a negative light, often as vampires (Tekla, for instance), and their victims are often identifiable as Strindberg himself. He continued to write about the social evils and of the alienated modern man, desperate and lonely in a renounced society until he died in 1912.

Although Hellman depicts an unhappy marital relationship in her plays like Strindberg, yet she was free from any such gender bias. Her portrayal of unhappy men and women is just a facet of stark realism. If she presents Andrew Rodman and Horace Giddens as victimized husbands then she also shows some women such as Martha, Birdie, Lavinia, Charlotte and Nina as victims of their men. Herself a non-conformist, therefore, she always felt fascinated by such men of letters who did not conform to the established norms, especially, when they were unhealthy and outdated and required a shift.

Hellman showed signs of maturity as she stepped into her middle age, and turned to Chekhov with her last couple of plays, especially with, *The Autumn Garden*. Her realistic presentation of 'life as it is' avoids the artificiality inherent in her earlier well-made plays. All the characters in this play, as in Chekhov's plays, give an illusion of next-door neighbours. Like the characters in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Seagull* or *The Three Sisters*, they are perfectly life-like who appear and exit, eat and drink, talk about weather and gossip about neighbours and off-stage characters, and are naive and self-deluded, and lie to themselves and others. In *The Autumn Garden*, there are no intrigues, no violent action, no contrived events and no organic plot. There are no real heroes and no real villains; there are multiple characters, and they all play an equally important role in the play. Chekhov's characters lead a dualistic life, and the gap that often exists between the public and the private selves is central to his plots. Hellman's characters confront the truth of their false beings and are thus stripped of their illusions, whereas, Chekhov's characters continue to be deluded throughout.

Hellman also shows the influence of native writers as well, like Eugene O'Neill and Dashiell Hammett. Eugene O'Neill was a senior contemporary playwright of Lillian Hellman, and much before her appearance on the American stage, O'Neill had already been an established playwright. He introduced psychological realism in his plays, so do we notice this element in Hellman's plays as well, and these Freudian

overtones gave American plays a new vitality and originality. Their plays are full of aberrant and inverted relationships - incestuously lustful fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, adulterous men and women, homosexual love relationships and repressed sexual instincts, to name just a few psychological issues. They both sought to portray how the hidden psychological process affects the outward actions of their characters. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), O'Neill uses a Greek legend as his model, and Hellman's Hubbard plays also exhibit considerable resemblance to Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Oresteia*. However, Hellman's strong protest against the passive indifference of the bystanders in the face of social and moral evils takes her plays beyond the realm of pure tragedy, unlike O'Neill's, who adheres to the Greek pattern to a sizeable degree. Like O'Neill, Hellman's good characters too wrestle with societal constrictions, and usually give in to forces they are powerless to control. O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1935) which is an autobiographical play showed agonized relationships between members of a family (father, mother and two sons), and Hellman's no play is free from such painful relationships.

However, the man who exerted a seminal influence on Hellman's personality and her works as a playwright was Dashiell Hammett. When they met in 1930, he was thirty-six and she was twenty-three and they were both married to others. Hammett was already an acclaimed novelist of such classic mysteries as *Red Harvest* (1928), *The Dain Curse* (1929), *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), and later he produced, *The Glass Key* (1931) and *The Thin Man* (1934). Hellman, however, was an aspiring writer who saw the older-man as a mentor, critic and lover. Dashiell Hammett who introduced her into the literary world, and shaped her crude write-ups through severe critical comments. It was Hammett who supplied her with the material for her first and most groundbreaking play, *The Children's Hour*. A strict disciplinarian as he was to Hellman, he made her write the script of the play several times over, before giving his final approval. At one point, Hellman said, "If this isn't any good. I'll never write again. I may even kill myself." Similarly, after rewriting the script of *The Little Foxes* nine times, she left the manuscript of the play, with great trepidation at the threshold of Hammett's bedroom, however, "he finally gave her the O.K." These instances suggest that he wanted Hellman to develop and sharpen her dramatic skills to the maximum. As a result of Hammett's able guidance both the cited plays proved to be highly successful on Broadway. Besides, he helped her with the script of other plays as well, for example, he wrote the thematic speech of the play, *The Autumn Garden*, himself, and the plot-outline of her last original play, *Toys in the Attic* was also suggested to her by him.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact universally acknowledged that those whom we admire do influence our minds directly or indirectly.

Hellman too loved to read works of Ibsen, Brecht, Strindberg and Chekhov and therefore, their influence upon her life and works is evident. Hammett played the most significant role in shaping Hellman's career as a foremost and formidable lady playwright on the American stage. He also seemed to have given direction to her social ideas and leftist outlook. As they both favoured the Communist ideology, they were even labelled as the "Communist couple," and were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy-era. Hammett served six months in a federal penitentiary for refusing to answer the questions, whereas, Hellman was acquitted by the jury in absence of sufficient evidence against her.

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